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Rules For Dating a Romantic Hero

Written by Harriet Evans

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Rules For Dating a Romantic Hero

Harriet Evans

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From the *Daily News*, Friday 6 July 2012:

> **Good news** for everyone who misses their weekly fix of *Downton Abbey*: the real-life version is about to get interesting. Those in the Norfolk area on Saturday lunchtime should hurry along to Chartley Hall, one of England's greatest stately homes. It is the family seat of dashing, brooding Dominic, Marquis of Ranelagh (regularly voted the UK's most eligible bachelor). The house is without a mistress, but, my sources say, not for long. The Marquis, also known as Nick, has been dating 'ordinary' girl Laura Foster, whom he met when she visited the house with her parents four years ago. Theirs has been a stormy relationship, to say the least, with Laura furious at the lack of wedding bells. But I hear things could be about to change. The Marquis has funded Laura's very own pet project, a children's bookshop in the village. It opens this weekend with speeches and a hog roast and, we presume, a rare sighting of the elusive

couple. Will Laura get the one thing she's been wishing for . . . a ring?

Rule One:

Shoot anyone who compares you to Kate Middleton

Sometimes, Laura found her situation funny. Most of the time it was wonderful, if pretty weird. But sometimes there were moments when she'd have to bite the inside of her mouth to stop herself from laughing. She'd close her eyes and wish her flatmate Paddy could see her judge the Cutest Pug Competition. Or her best friend Jo could watch her come down the stairs of Chartley in a long ballgown, curtseying to a Very Important Royal Person.

After the moment was over she'd allow herself a small grin, nothing more in case anyone was watching. Because she was the only one who seemed to think it was completely bloody crackers that she, Laura Foster, was living this life. She had literally nothing to her name (unless you counted her 'Friend to Animals' Brownie badge and her First Prize for

Best Doodle at St Mark's Primary School, 1989).

There was only one reason for it, too, and that was Nick. She had realised a while ago that being with Nick meant she had to give up a lot, but it was always going to be worth it.

She'd said this to Jo once, sitting outside the pub, glugging white wine spritzers. Jo had swallowed an ice cube and nearly choked to death.

'Give up a lot?' she'd said after a few minutes, once the colour in her face had returned to (nearly) normal. 'That's blimmin' rich! Quite literally! Get over it, Laura, what are you on about?'

Laura had swirled her glass around so the ice clanked loudly, like chains. 'It sounds stupid, forget it. But there is stuff you give up,' she said. 'It's hard to explain.'

'What exactly? Spending your own money? Living in a hovel? You are funny, Laura. If I were you I'd give up living with Paddy and doing your job in a heartbeat.' Jo was down to earth. 'God, I'd give up being married to Chris and having Iris if it meant shacking up with Nick in his house. Most people would. You're Kate Bloody Middleton!'

Then Jo leaned forward, breathing wine

fumes into Laura's face. 'Don't go around complaining. It makes you sound like one of the ugly sisters out of *Cinderella*. I mean, 'cos of the complaining, not 'cos you're ugly.'

Laura had laughed and said, 'Of course. You're right, I should shut up.' And she didn't talk to Jo about it again.

After all, these little things that worried her more and more lately – they were just in her head, weren't they? Why couldn't she just forget about the annoying stuff and enjoy the rest of it? Pretend her life was as perfect as everyone assumed it was? Like Mum and Dad's neighbours, whom she'd bump into on the high street back home. Or her work mates who thought the whole thing was hilarious – 'Where's Laura? Entertaining the King of Denmark this weekend?' Or her old friends who'd started off thinking it was mad and now thought it was great. And it was, wasn't it? Why on earth wouldn't it be?

But Nick and Laura's relationship wasn't great. She didn't know why, she just knew things weren't right. And they hadn't been for a while, really, not since . . . well, it was hard to say when. She thought that maybe he was still angry with her for what she'd done. Or that she regretted coming back to him. On the

surface, everything continued as normal. She could forget about it most of the time, pretend it was all in her head.

Perhaps it all really started the day of the grand opening of the bookshop.

Rule Two:

Real-life romantic heroes come with real-life families. And families are like neighbours – you're stuck with them. Make the best of it.

'Laura, dear. You look lovely. I'm sorry to disturb . . .' Lady Rose Balmore, Nick's elder sister, came into the bedroom (without knocking – she never knocked). She gave Laura a brief smile as she bustled past her and flung open one of the small cupboards in the eaves of the roof.

'I am sure there's a pair of candlesticks in here that would be perfect in the Green Chamber. We put them away when all the work was done, and Tony's convinced they belong downstairs again. You don't mind me looking, do you?'

Laura paused in the act of picking paint out

of her hair. She'd been up 'til 2 a.m. the previous night at the bookshop. 'Go ahead,' she said, even though Rose was already rifling through the cupboard. 'Be my guest.'

Downstairs a loud bell sounded and Rose stood up. 'Aha! Opening time.' She cocked her head. 'My favourite moment of the day.'

Every morning, come rain or shine, every day of the year (except Christmas and New Year's Day) a bell would ring at 10 a.m. to declare Chartley Hall open for business. From Nick's small, sunny bedroom, right at the top of the vast building, Laura could look out and see the visitors arriving. Cars crawling up the long avenue of oaks, cameras and phones snapping away. Men, women and children in their hundreds swarming across the terrace, up the great front stairs, marching out across the vast back lawn where teas were served.

Sometimes Laura would emerge from Nick's private quarters onto the main corridor of the house and people would stare at her in surprise. Who was this person, coming out of a secret doorway? Was it a . . . a real-life *aristocrat*? Then they'd examine her more closely, and either look away or move on. Oh no, she's one of us. Doesn't belong here. Lost her way probably. It made her smile that it was so obvious to them.

Of course, if she happened to be walking through the house with Nick, it was a different story. People stopped and stared and giggled, as if David Beckham, Colin Firth and Prince William all rolled into one had suddenly appeared in front of them. Rose, Nick's other sister Lavinia, or their still-glamorous mother Vivienne all got the same reaction. The Needhams were a good-looking bunch, even if, like Nick, they either didn't know or didn't care.

There was just *something* about them. Their mother had been a film star and their father came from a family as old as the Wars of the Roses. Though Laura thought that was all rubbish – didn't everyone come from someone who was alive several hundred years ago? And it was hardly like they were perfect, either.

Rose had – though to mention it was to bring on a stare so cold it could freeze Hell – an early marriage to a rock star and a stretch in rehab for heroin addiction under her belt. These never seemed to come up when she was making speeches to the Women's Institute on Living in the World's Most Beautiful House. No, it was very much part of the past, and not to be discussed.

Laura sometimes like to remind herself of

it, though, when Rose said something particularly *Daily Mail*-ish. Nick's family had a happy knack for rewriting history, which was good, because they'd been around so long Laura supposed you couldn't always be raking up old mistakes.

Recently, now that both of Rose's children were away at boarding school and her husband Sir Malcolm was often abroad on business trips, she'd been spending more than half her time at Chartley Hall.

'Good morning!' she'd say, sweeping past a gaggle of bug-eyed pensioners kitted out in all-weather mackintoshes. 'Have a wonderful day! I see you have a guide to the gardens. May I recommend the pergola? It's so pleasant this time of year.'

If the world was fairer, or if they were all living in Sweden, Rose would have inherited the house, and maybe she'd have been the best person for the job. She did really love it. Maybe too much. Laura watched her now as she gazed out of the window, fingers drumming on the wide ledge, absorbed by the view of the park, the curve of the East Wing of the house, then tore herself away, turning back towards Laura.

'Are we all ready?' Rose gave her a bright

smile. 'Is it . . . ah. Are you wearing that for the opening?'

Laura looked down at her khaki silk Topshop button-down shirtdress. 'Yes. Er, I bought it specially.'

'Right. Right, wonderful!'

'Rose,' Laura said. 'What does that mean?'

'I only thought you might want to wear something more traditional.' Rose cleared her throat delicately. 'This is your big day. Of sorts.'

'What's the traditional dress for opening a children's bookshop?' Laura said, trying to sound jokey. 'Harry Potter scar'n'specs? Mog? Meg?' She knew she was rambling, she always did when she was nervous. 'The other Mog, I always think it's weird that there are two different cats called—'

'Yes, yes,' Rose said sharply. She moved towards Laura, smoothing her pale pink Chanel suit over her hips with brisk efficiency. 'You know, dear, you have to stop going off the point. Nick's spent a lot setting you up in this business. People are going to be watching you today.' One neat finger flicked a brave lock of bobbed hair out of her face. 'Please don't let him down.'

'He didn't set me up, I applied for the grant and the Foundation gave it to me . . .' Laura began, then stopped.

'Nearly all the funding – you still have to get the final piece,' said Rose briskly. 'And, of course, I'm *sure* you will.'

Laura shrugged and smiled, determined on this, of all days, not to let Rose wind her up. 'Come now. Less Lady Thatcher, eh? Today's a celebration.'

Rose closed her eyes, just briefly, and smiled. 'Of course. Perhaps I shouldn't have said it. We're all so proud of you. This bookshop's a wonderful thing for the village. For the whole estate. I should leave you to do your make-up.'

She patted her on the arm graciously and left Laura, who had just spent ten minutes doing her make-up, staring at herself in the mirror.

Breathe deeply. It's going to be great. Had the carpet fitter fixed the metal trim that Casey had tripped over only yesterday? Had the wholesaler delivered the last of the Peppa Pig books? Would the paint be dry? If the paint wasn't dry and people started sitting down on windowsills it would be a disaster, a huge, mega, painted-bottoms disaster. *Breathe . . .*

The door opened again and she whirled round, hoping it would be him.